

A Hope to Cling To by MidnightEverlark

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Summary: While talking to Will in the shed, trying to break through the Mind Flayer's control, Mike starts thinking about what he would do if Will gave up, and completely unintentionally blurts, "I love you." Mike's existential crisis follows. Meanwhile, Will uses the words as his anchor, holding onto this glimmer of hope with all his might as he struggles to hang on against the Mind Flayer

1. The Promise

Will

The lights are bright-white and blinding, and mercilessly hot. They leave drifting blue-green ghosts against Will's eyelids when he blinks. Figures hover just behind the lights, half-engulfed in deep shadows. *Mom, Jonathan, Mike, Chief Hopper.* The Shadow's fury ebbs away, leaving the dizzy ache of exhaustion behind, and Will's bare feet scrape over a rough, freezing floor. They're tucked up underneath the chair he's tied to, as if trying to flee the cold, but He isn't cold. Will can feel it - the bitter November chill, quickly numbing his skin through the paper-thin hospital robe. The sun must have set long ago. But Will doesn't shiver. Can't shiver. He can only recoil from the *hot-bright-white-hate* of the lights and listen to his mother tell him about his birthday. Her face is at once clear and warped in front of him, her words distinct yet distant. As if there's a thick pane of glass between them.

And then Jonathan is talking and Will's head moves to find the voice. He talks about Castle Byers. The intangible glass thins - just a bit. The Shadow finds little importance in human memories. Half of its attention flicks away, to other matters, and the glass melts a bit more. Jonathan's face is sharper, his voice more immediate.

And then Mike's voice reaches Will through the haze, and he feels his head snap around.

"Do you remember the day we met?"

The dark room tilts around him and when he swallows his throat feels rough and gummy, the tissues dry. He ignores it. Focuses in on Mike's face. He still feels like he's underwater, or else floating in space, or maybe just crushed into the unrelenting pressure of a straight-jacket. But somewhere in the suffocated, strangled corners of his mind, something flickers like the spark of a lighter: *he's still here.* Mike is still here. He was there on the floor of Will's bedroom, he was there in the hospital room, and now he's here. In this *bright-dark-cold-hot* place that the Shadow can't pin down.

"It was - it was the first day of kindergarten," Mike says.

His cheeks are red with cold. A strand of dark hair nearly touches the lashes of one eye.

"I knew nobody. I had no friends. And -"

Mike blinks and a tear streaks down his cheek. The cords in Will's shoulders ache with tension. He's rigid on the chair.

"I just felt - so alone. And - and so scared. But... I saw you on the swings and... and you were alone too."

He's fighting tears, throat closing around every other phrase, and Will finally feels himself shiver. *I remember. I remember.*

"You were just swinging by yourself. And... I just walked up to you and... I asked. I asked if you wanted to be my friend. And you said yes."

Mike's lips turn up in an impossibly gentle smile - the first smile Will has seen on his face since before the Shadow took over entirely. It leaves something small and warm in the very center of his chest, and Will grasps at it with all his might, trying to seize it with icy fingers.

Mike's voice softens, the smile fading to something far more breakable. "You said yes. It was the best thing I've ever done."

Will can feel his chest tightening, diaphragm quivering with the urge to sob, but his muscles are still firmly on lockdown. He can't move. Can't even cry. But he's close - closer than he has been since the last time he woke up, straining towards the surface. The muscles in his cheeks flutter, working in preparation to smile, but the Shadow's grip won't budge and Will can only breathe, breathe, gazing up at a face as familiar as his own, memorizing the sharp contrast of blinding white light and shadow across the planes of his best friend's features.

Then his mother is talking again, jerking His attention away from Mike, and she's begging him to talk to them and Will wants so badly to cry, wants to scream, *I'm here, I'm still here! Don't give up on me, please! I'm still here, I'm here, please hear me, please!*

He reaches, as far and hard as he can, struggling to the surface, fighting against the crushing cold - and a tiny, clipped sound catches halfway up his throat before the Shadow yanks him under again with a snarl. His lungs fill with froth, his vision tunnels, his mind blurs and numbs and he hears himself say, "Let me go."

Cold. He's so cold. And so, so tired. His fingers tingle and he wiggles them slowly, wondering if they'll get frostbite and fall -

Wiggling. He can wiggle his fingers. He can move them.

Will gathers his strength, and taps. Taps against the wood and duct tape of the chair he's bound to. Taps. Taps.

H E R E.

I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. Please.

But they're leaving. His mother, Mike, Jonathan, even Chief Hopper, all moving out of his range of sight. A door opens and closes. And he's alone with Him.

They will always leave you, He whispers matter-of-factly, and then squeezes down on Will's lungs before he can sob.

Mike

The smell of old, damp wood and lawn fertilizer and dust and mold and cold metal seems to clog Mike's nose even after they leave the shed. It follows him inside the house, where they decode Will's message - - and lingers in the fabric of his inadequate, navy-blue hoodie as he shivers against the cold.

When they re-enter the shed, Will's face is empty and guarded, but this time it doesn't take long to draw him out again. Jonathan sits in front of him and gazes into his little brother's face intently, his favorite song beating out rhythmically from the speakers of a portable tape player. They all take turns in that spot. Talking. Sharing memories. One after the other, trading off like a slow, strange dance. Jonathan. Mike. Joyce. Jonathan. Mike. Joyce. Jonathan. And all the while Hopper paces behind Will, out of view, relaying his new

message to the others through the radio.

It's when Will stops tapping and the others move away, talking in low voices at the other end of the shed, that Mike settles himself in front of the lights again. The song has long ended, but the words still whirl around and around in his head: *Should I stay or should I go? Should I stay or should I go?*

He looks at Will - the dull pallor of his skin, the deep circles under his eyes, the slump of his shoulders - and a lump rises in Mike's throat.

Should I stay or should I go?

Instead of another memory, he tries to swallow down the lump and says, "If you... Will, I know it hurts -" he can still hear Will's screams, as clearly as though he was still shrieking in pain - "And I know it's hard, and if you can't... If you have to let go, that's okay. I understand, but -"

His voice breaks and Mike realizes that he's shaking, chest jumping erratically as he struggles once again to contain tears. Will is staring at him without blinking, some expression trying valiantly to break through, but it only manages to reach his eyes and twitch in his cheek.

"But I'm asking you to try. Just for a little longer, please t-try to hold on. I c-can't - I can't lose you again."

He didn't expect to cry, but he is. He looks down and lurches with nearly silent sobs.

All the memories they shared and a thousand more swirl in his head, thick as snowflakes. Will. His best friend. Kind and brave and quiet. All the bike rides, all the sleepovers, all the passed notes. And the other moments, too - all those little moments he never thinks about, tries not to think about. The moments of *something else, something different, something more*. The glances and brushed fingers and hugs that lasted just a heartbeat too long. The warm familiarity of Will's voice, somehow unique to any other voice in the world. The split-second *what-ifs* that Mike doesn't think about. They're all bubbling

up, and hot tears spill over one after the other and -

"I need you."

Needs Will by his side, at the next desk over, at the table in the basement, riding alongside him on their bikes, at his shoulder at the arcade, breathing evenly beside him at sleepovers. Where he's always been, since they were chubby and scrawny five-year-olds, respectively. Where he's supposed to be.

Should I stay or should I go?

Mike wants to grab Will by the shoulders and shake him, hard, and yell, *Don't go, don't!* Because he can't stop picturing the world without him. He can't stop the awful slideshow that's flicking through his mind. An empty desk in the science classroom - not just for a day or a week, but permanently empty. A gap at the table, on the couch, space left unfilled. Another funeral. But this time, no secret knowledge to shield himself from the eulogy, the stink of roses - no assurance that this is all fake, it's not real, Will is alive, he is, he's still there. Will's ever-so-slightly lopsided grin, his drawings, the way he leans up against Mike's arm without thinking about it when they stand side-by-side. Gone. Forever.

A dull, hollow burn is reaching tendrils through Mike's chest, creeping up his throat and curling around his heart and stabbing into his spine. And he can't, he *can't*, not again, and all at once he pitches forward and wraps his arms around the smaller boy and quietly, hoarsely blurts, "I love you."

Will's breath catches audibly. Mike blinks, arms going stiff. Shock is rippling through him like a small, sharp knife. He didn't mean to say that - never planned to - never consciously formed the thought or words in his mind before it came out in a fierce whisper against Will's shoulder.

He pulls away abruptly. Surprise and embarrassment make quick work of his cold cheeks, turning them red and hot in an instant. Confusion hits immediately after. But underneath it all, like a current of liquid water under the frozen crust of a stream, there's something else. Soft in the jumble of sharp-edged emotions. Curiously tender.

Mike dares to glance up at Will, expecting a reflection of his own confused embarrassment. Instead his gaze meets eyes that are wide and questioning, something *almost* happy sparkling behind the Mind Flayer's controlled mask. Dull and lifeless just moments ago, Will's eyes are *shining*.

"Um," Mike says, because it's all his brain can come up. His eyes dart over to the others, and he swears he'd like nothing more than to plummet through the floor when he notices Joyce peering at him from around the police chief's shoulder. He looks back at Will and makes a valiant effort at pulling himself together. "Um. Just. Promise me you'll try. Just please try."

And maybe it's just the way his fingers are trembling, or the cold, or just his imagination, but Mike swears he sees Will's chin dip in a tiny nod.

Will

I promise.

It rings through his mind like the church bell at noon, over and over and over.

I promise. I'll try. I promise I'll try. I promise.

Will's flagging strength is bolstered. Suddenly, he's not *quite* ready to give up yet, despite the pain - *so much* pain - and the numbing, sucking cold, and the darkness, and the unbearable pressure of the Shadow in his mind, in his veins, under his skin, everywhere, and the exhaustion that makes his eyes burn and his head swim with fog and his limbs feel like lead - but the Shadow won't let him rest, no, it keeps his head up and his eyes open no matter how much his body screams for sleep.

But.

But now Will has something else. One more reason to fight. And, like the warmth in his chest ignited by Mike's smile, Will clings to it with a relentless grip, numb fingers clamped onto it, body curled

protectively around the most precious thing he has left.

Mike has already moved away, all stutters and uncoordinated limbs, but Will's heart hasn't stopped *tha-thumping* behind his ribs, and he doesn't think it ever will. He knows it's too late for him, but maybe - in another universe, in another timeline, maybe -

Maybe there could be something good after all of this. Maybe... maybe - he barely dares to think it - there could be something worth all of it. Maybe there could be a warm, calloused hand to hold under the table, or a pair of gentle arms to hold him when the nightmares come, or maybe even a kiss - just one - he'd be happy with just one -

But Mike didn't mean that. He couldn't have. He didn't. But maybe - *maybe* -

It doesn't matter. They're going to close the gate. He already told them to. He's going to die. He should probably be more concerned about that idea - it should probably send him into a panic, screaming silently, beating himself against the bars of his mind - but he considers it with a practical kind of glumness. There's no other way. If the Shadow wins, they'll die. His mother, Jonathan, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Nancy. Mike. Everyone. He already told them what to do. E. It's too late.

Some small, stupid part of him pipes up that *maybe it's not too late, maybe they'll find a way, maybe there's a chance, maybe* -

But he knows it's no use. At least the pain will stop. At least there's that.

Will has just about decided to drift off into a nice, calm daydream for a bit when a phone rings. It's muffled and distant and the Shadow is immediately there, in his lungs, in his muscles, snapping his head around so fast his neck pops. Will's thoughts go silent, as if shut down with a muffling fist, and then He's calling them - the others. Will sways, dizzy, sinking back into a corner of himself and he can feel them approaching, twisting through tunnels, thundering across fields, honing in on their position.

There are voices, a bustle of activity, and a deep-sharp ache in his

arm and he's dizzydizzydizzyblack.

A/N: if you have a moment, a review would really make my day :)

2. The Breath in Your Lungs

Mike

The taillights of Chief Hopper's car flash around the corner of the driveway like the red-ember eyes of a dragon. Then they're gone, taking El with them.

Mike stands in front of the bottom porch step and stares at the place where they disappeared, feeling like someone took a sledgehammer directly to his sternum. He's already so sick with anxiety at the very real possibility of losing Will, and now El is heading directly into just as much danger. The two people Mike cares most about, both whisked away in two separate cars to two different fights, vanishing into the misty Indiana night like fireflies.

He could lose them both tonight.

Mike lets the others pull him back inside, where it's only marginally warmer. The front window curtains snap and stir restlessly in the cold draft. Mike does the same. He paces and glares and drums his fingers against his thigh, driving Lucas halfway crazy. His gaze flicks back to the window every few seconds, though it's barely been five minutes since the two cars bumped out of sight.

When El stepped through the Byers' front door, the relief that poured through Mike was immense. She was okay. She was here - *she was here*, safe and solid and real, and holding her, Mike was happier than he had been in days. But there was guilt too. Guilt, because El had barely been back two minutes when Mike found himself comparing that happiness to what he had felt in the shed, just before the phone rang. And that guilt, along with the hopelessness and worry of the past year, all came out on the nearest unfortunate target - who just so happened to be Chief Hopper. And still Mike couldn't shake the nagging feeling at the back of his mind, even after he screamed and cried and punched and called the police chief every ugly name he could think of. On any other day, it would have helped. On any other day, he would have yelled and cursed and punched pillows and flushed the problem out of his system, and felt lighter afterwards. Now he just feels heavy, and he doesn't know what else to do. So he

paces. And he thinks.

He should just be happy that El is alive. He wasn't sure, for a while. Why can't he just be happy? Well, other than the fact that both she and Will, along with his big sister and a handful of other people he's come to care about, are currently headed directly towards intense and certain danger. He snorts and shakes his head as he comes to the end of the living room and turns on a heel, restarting his loop around the house. Yeah, other than that. He has El back. It's what he's been hoping and praying and pleading for since last November. Why can't that be enough? Why can't he just be happy with that?

And he is happy - he is! - but.

But.

Standing in the draft of the freshly-smashed front window, smiling down at the brown eyes he'd recognize anywhere, Mike's brain had run an unauthorized comparison. And the conclusion had been immediate and hopelessly baffling: he loved El. And it felt immediately, entirely different than what he accidentally gave name to in the shed.

So, what the hell.

"Could you sit down or something?" Lucas sighs as he passes by with a broom. Max is already kneeling with the dustpan, shoving glass chunks into a pile. The grating, tinkling noise makes Mike's skin crawl.

He liked El last year, definitely. He liked her big, expressive dark eyes and her quiet kindness and her rare, bright smile. And her superpowers. She had fit right into the group - well, maybe not at first. Definitely not at first. But near the end, it was like she was already a member of the party. She was the Mage. Pretty and curious and strong - stronger than Mike, probably stronger than the whole rest of the party combined. She saved them. She saved Will. And despite her strength, from the moment he saw her shivering in the rain, Mike wanted nothing more than to see her safe and warm and protected. And, admittedly, it was nice to have someone fill the empty space at his side - the space Will had always occupied. It

wasn't the same - that empty space remained raw and gaping until Mike burst through the door of the hospital room with a joyful shout and flung himself onto Will's weak form - but it was something. Something good.

Mike turns again and wanders through the kitchen, where Dustin and Steve are picking up the contents of the fridge off the floor. The fridge itself is full of dead, slimy demodog, and Mike can only shake his head at the prospect of Joyce finding it the next time she goes to get milk or butter.

That's assuming she even comes back. Assuming the Mind Flayer doesn't win and kill every last one of them, starting with Will.

Will. Mike has been trying to avoid thinking about him, because it's just too much, and he's already too close to either crying or screaming again - El and Will, both in mortal danger, maybe dead already, maybe gone, both of them, gone, maybe -

No. He can't think about that. Won't.

They're alive. They have to be. El. Will.

Will.

Mike's restless, drumming fingers remind him of the morse Will tapped out in the shed. H E R E. E.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He's never known Morse as well as Will, but he still remembers some. They used to use it when they were kids. They'd tap secret messages through the walls to each other, playing Spies. When Mike got a set of radios for his tenth birthday, he all but forgot Morse code. Apparently, Will didn't.

Mike breathes in through his nose until his chest aches, and then lets the air spill past his lips. And he thinks about the shed. It takes very little effort at all to bring back the thoughts that had spilled over under the bright-white lights. Mike's emotions have been simmering close to the surface for the past few days, and he only needs to pause and close his eyes for it all to return full-force.

I need you.

That part had been intentional. And unquestionably true.

Don't go, don't.

Mike's wandering takes him past the open door of Will's room, and his step hitches. He wants to scurry past with his head down and think about anything else. He wants to go in and lie down beside the bed, cocooned in the sleeping bag Joyce keeps in the linen closet specifically for him, and maybe when his eyes open again it'll be morning and none of this will have happened.

He goes in.

The realization comes to him in bits and pieces, and then all at once, slamming into him like the brick wall he made the acquaintance of when he was eight, speeding along on his child-sized, red bike.

It's so simple and obvious that it's no wonder Mike never consciously considered it before. The... *connection* he has with Will is something that seems to live in his bones. It's been there for so long, settled so effortlessly and completely into his marrow that he had barely noticed it. Like the way you stop being aware of the shirt on your back or the pen in your hand or the air in your lungs until it's gone - until you're on your back under a dangling, snapped tree branch, muscles frozen and twitching, mouth gaping, struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything. Like the way you never think about how good it is to breathe until you can't.

Will has always been there. Well, that's not *entirely* true - Mike can reach farther back in his memories, to when he was very little and Nancy was just starting elementary school. But his memories get fuzzy and jumbled any earlier than that. A lot of his first real, clear memories start in kindergarten. And in any case, more of Mike's life has been spent being Will's best friend than not. And *something* grew there, so slowly and so organically that, like the breath in his lungs, Mike didn't even notice until suddenly it was gone. Until *he* was gone. And when Will returned - when Mike's chest unfroze and he could gasp in a desperate lungful again - he started noticing. He's been noticing more and more for the past year. There's an ease and

warmth of being around Will, more than anyone else. A comfortable feeling of knowing he can tell Will anything - talk to him when no one else would understand. Not that Dustin or Lucas wouldn't understand. Or El. El always understood. But it's different with Will.

It's like that. Always has been like that. Different. He just never thought about it. Never had a reason to. That was just how it was - how it is.

The little thrill that zips through his stomach like hyperactive butterflies whenever Will hugs him or leans up against his arm at the arcade, backseat driving the game while Mike pretends to be annoyed. The swell of protectiveness and worry whenever Will is hurt or upset - especially after last year. The affection that bubbles up between the spokes of Mike's ribcage and pulls up the corners of his mouth when Will hands him a new drawing, chattering animatedly as he points out the details - *"Here's the dragon, and it's got the silver chalice, see? And there's the castle down the road - we still need to get there and save the songstress! We're finishing the campaign this weekend, right?"*

Mike turns over the shell in his hands, unsure when he picked it up from Will's bedside table. It's a souvenir from one of the few family vacations the Byers were able to afford. He sinks onto the orange-ish bedspread and cups the delicate shell in his palms, staring down at it with unfocused eyes.

These little moments - the same moments of *something else, something different, something more* that all crowded to the surface in the shed - they aren't new. He thought they were, but they aren't. They're just as familiar and comfortable as the Wheeler's basement on a Saturday evening. It's just that they were so intrinsic to the fabric of Mike's everyday reality that he hadn't paid them any attention until Will was gone and then back again.

He's paying attention now.

Mike slaps the shell back on the nightstand hard enough that he flinches, afraid it'll crack, but it's still intact when he pushes off the bed and storms out into the hallway, driven by a nervous energy that sparks and swirls in his chest like a high-pressure lightning storm.

He knows what it means. Logically, he knows. The facts line up. The evidence points to a conclusion. It's just that the conclusion doesn't make sense. Mike can't like Will. Not like that. Will is his best friend, and, more importantly, a boy. Well, not that it would be unheard of, but - but Mike knows for sure he likes girls. Always has. He likes - liked - likes? - El, for godssake.

But then he comes into the front room again, and the rustling curtains draw his gaze.

Out there, somewhere, Joyce and Jonathan and Nancy are trying to burn the Mind Flayer out of Will's body. They don't even know if it'll work. It's a plan built on a hunch, and if it fails -

If it fails -

If Will loses this fight -

If the Mind Flayer wins, and Will's thin chest stops rising and falling -

He doesn't want to, but Mike remembers when they pulled that fake body from the quarry. He remembers the sickening, twisted *wrongness* that reverberated through his own body, scalp to toes. How completely his body had rejected it. How he'd ridden his bike home so fast that his legs burned and the tattered hem of his jeans had gotten caught in a spoke and he'd skidded across the dirt road and rolled over and retched into the ditch, numb and wrong and no, no, no no *no no nonono* -

And the sick, frantic tightness in his chest ignores every single societal rule that there is. Because that can't happen. Not again. It can't. He needs Will. He -

Okay. Okay, so, he loves Will. That's not so hard to believe. Will is his best friend, and of course he loves his friends. Of course. Will has been his best friend, and nearly constant companion, for almost nine years. He's closer to Will than almost anyone else. They trust each other. They tell each other the truth. They know almost everything about each other. Of course he loves Will, in the way he loves all his friends - the way you're supposed to love your friends. Competitive. Friendly. Teasing. Supportive. Brotherly.

What was it they said? *A friend is someone that you'd do anything for. And they never break a promise. That's super important. Because friends - they tell each other things.*

So it's not that hard to think the words, *Okay, yeah, I love Will.*

At least, it shouldn't be. But there's that stupid, traitorous little flutter in his stomach again, and a clammy dampness in his palms, and his heart is kicking against his ribs for no apparent reason. And it makes it so much harder - and so much easier - to push on to the next part:

I like Will.

Mike stares at the broken window, pausing only long enough to whisper, "Oh, shit."

Then he's back to pacing. He tries again, rolling the word around his tongue without letting it out: *like. Like. Like.* And then, once he's built up to it again: *I like Will.*

Mike is a good actor. He knows how to get away with things when he needs to. He knows what to say and how to smile to duck a tardy slip or a chore. He knows what a lie tastes like. And he knows this isn't one. It's true. And maybe it has been for a long time.

And that's terrifying.

He's normal. He is. He likes girls. He liked-likes-liked El. He likes their shiny hair and red lips and soft singing voices. He's not one of those guys his father grumbles about sometimes. He's normal, he's -

A bark of laughter surprises Mike as much as Lucas and Max. It pops past his lips as if jerked out by a string. This is stupid. No, this is ridiculous. Normal? Normal? Ha!

Sure, it's kind of weird for a boy to like another boy, but - Mike shakes his head and laughs again, softly this time, and Lucas quirks an eyebrow as if to say, *he's completely losing it* - but it's such a small, stupid thing to worry about. There are so many bigger problems.

El, a girl with actual Force-like superpowers, accidentally opened a portal to a shadow dimension, and now they're fighting dog-lizard

monsters straight out of a D&D manual. There's a secret laboratory at the edge of town. A hive-mind shadow-demon possessed his best friend. And the shadow dimension is slowly bleeding into small, boring, dull, quiet Hawkins. Normal? Normal, ha!

So, why not like a boy? Yeah, sure, why not? If there's ever a time, this is it.

Mike only realizes that he's still burbling over with occasional huffs of laughter when Lucas buffs the broom against the floor and snaps, "*Mike*. Would you just stop already? You're freaking me out."

And Mike's supercharged emotions turn on a dime and all at once he's back where he was five minutes ago, high-strung and anxious and *I could lose them both, I could* -

"You weren't in there, okay, Lucas?" he says, because it's the only halfway rational thing he can come up with. "That lab is swarming with hundreds of those dogs."

"Demodogs!" Dustin yells from the kitchen, determined to stamp a name on his "scientific discovery."

The conversation turns to the lab, and El, and Mike launches himself into the argument with little hesitation. This, at least, is familiar ground. And then he looks at the paper vines crawling across the walls and floor, and all at once they have a plan. A plan to help El, which will help Will. As long as they do something. As long as Mike can do something, *anything* besides pace around this freezing house and get more and more mixed up in his own thoughts. Finally, all the frantic energy inside him has an outlet.

He glances to either side, eyes meeting Dustin's, then Lucas's, then Max's. They each incline their heads, even while Steve tries to veto the whole idea. The party is in agreement. Party members are in need of assistance. And it is their duty to provide that assistance.

3. Daydreams

Will

They were in the tunnels.

Will sputters over the side of the cot, shaking so violently that his limbs jerk and tug on the cords around his wrist and ankles. His free hand grips the cot's edge like a vice. He's shivering. The air is as close and thick as cotton in his lungs, and his skin is wet and slick with sweat, but he's shivering like he's locked in a fever. Heat vibrates across his skin and suffuses his whole being - blood, bone, sinew and brain - and he shivers like a rabbit as he heaves over the side of the cot, bringing up nothing but frothy saliva and bile.

They were in the tunnels.

"Mike," Will rasps. It's a thin, dry sound, squeaking painfully through the cracked hinge of his throat. But he said it. *He* said it - not the Shadow.

It's gone.

It's *gone*.

He lifts his head. Heaters surround him, still giving off tangible waves of metal-and-smoke-scented warmth despite being shut off. The wires glow a dull red-orange, turning the cot and Will and the whole room the same color. His mother appears out of thin air, making him jolt again, and cradles his head to her shoulder, sniffing and calling his name over and over. Her voice sounds nearly as bad as his. Jonathan and Nancy stand at the other side of the cot, panting, faces shining with sweat, shirts soaked, hands linked between them. Will's neck twists, weakly, searching. But there's no one else. They're not here. A door hangs open like a broken jaw, and as the first billow of fresh, biting cold air wafts over him, Will pushes himself a quarter of the way upright.

"They were -" he tries, then folds in on himself and coughs. His mother rocks him, trying to *shush* the pitiful croak of his voice, but he

talks over her between the deep, racking coughs. "They were in - the tunnels, they - were in - in - they were -"

"It's okay, sweetie, it's okay," his mother soothes, stroking his hair, and his strength gives out. He slumps against her, and he can't stop shaking, he can't, it's like he's burning alive all over again and -

They were in the tunnels, they were in the tunnels, I saw them, I saw them in the now-memories, they were in the tunnels and I lost track of them, oh, god, I lost track of them -

"Did they get out?" he gets out once his convulsing lungs have exhausted themselves.

"Who?" Jonathan says. He reaches out to smooth Will's damp bangs away from his face. "Did who get out?"

"Mike - and the - others." Will lifts his aching head and makes eye contact with Nancy - capable, headstrong Nancy, who must know the answer. She has to know. "They were in - the tunnels. Mike and Dustin and Lucas and -" he coughs - "Steve and Max. I saw them. I saw them b-but then He was here trying to stop you and -"

He can feel, more than hear, the words slurring in his mouth, and they trail to a stop as his energy runs out again. He's so tired. His head spins and he lapses into darkness once, twice, before he drags his eyes open again.

"... stay at the house," Nancy is saying. She must have started talking a few seconds ago.

Will manages to mutter something along the lines of, "'s go," and his mother shakes her head and tells him to sit still, to rest, to breathe, but he won't. He struggles. He argues - at least, he tries. He made it this far. He's made it *so far*. He will not be weak. Not this time. He's never struggled so hard just to keep his head up, whole body stiff and aching, mind jumbled and foggy and he doesn't even know where he is, but he's made it this far. He barely has the energy to think, but he won't let go of one thought - the only clear thought in his head -

I have to make sure they got out.

And after what could be ten seconds or ten minutes of refusing to rest, refusing to shut up until he makes sure, his mother finally gives in.

Jonathan carries him to the car.

Will registers the dark, slender shapes of trees ambling by.

He swims to semi-consciousness an indeterminate time later. The car is still humming and bouncing along a road. The windows are dark. Nancy is propping his head against her shoulder, making sure it doesn't bounce around when the car dips and turns. Will begins to fade again.

I'm alive.

His eyes flick open. Somehow, he hadn't fully realized it until now, but -

I'm alive.

He's gone.

We won.

He doesn't have the strength to feel happy. Or much of anything, really, except for the soul-deep exhaustion that overpowers everything else, even the lingering pain.

Half-formed thoughts spin lazily through the watery haze of his mind, never staying quite long enough to grasp onto, floating in and out of focus. The victorious cries of a successful campaign finale. An itching, wet sting at his wrists and ankles where the cords grated off a few layers of skin. A box of crayons that seemed as big and heavy as him when he first got it. Graying wood chips under a swing set, troughs carved out from hundreds of kicking feet. A syringe. Bright white lights. A hug and a whisper against his shoulder.

"I love you."

Mike.

Will remembers. His eyes open again, briefly, and some distant corner of his brain recognizes the treetops and phone lines of the road home. He remembers. But it's all muddled up in other memories, in the now-memories, in nightmares, in shadows and scraps of conversation and figments of his imagination. He could have imagined it. Or maybe the Shadow planted it in his mind as a cruel trick. But he hopes. With the very, very last of his energy, he hopes that it was real.

Fragrant steam curls past Will's fingers, carrying the rich, salty smell of canned chicken noodle soup. He lets the spoon hover over the bowl for longer than necessary, willing the steam to thaw his permanently cold fingers. No matter what he does, he can't shake the phantom chill of the Shadow from under his skin. So one hand cradles the soup bowl, and the other pauses above it, soaking in the borderline-scalding temperature. Onscreen, the studio audience laughs on cue.

He doesn't remember it, but his mother assures him repeatedly that Will completed his mission. He stayed fractionally conscious just long enough to be carried through the front door, where the rest of the party was sprawled out over various parts of the living room, dead asleep. A short, frantic search had been executed when Nancy couldn't find Mike, but they located him almost immediately, curled up on his sleeping bag beside Will's bed. He jerked awake as they entered, clothes dirty and dark eyes wide as Will was carried past him.

That's the only part Will remembers after being in the car - tired, dark eyes, and a muddled, raw, simple exchange.

"You're okay."

"You're alive."

Then he passed out for approximately eighteen hours straight and woke up in a hospital room.

That was three days and no less than five doctors' visits ago, and he's only just feeling more like a person and less like his undead

nickname. The IVs and scans and sterile bandages at the hospital helped marginally - at least they got him re-hydrated when he couldn't keep a single tablespoon of water down - but he prefers this over the lab any day. The couch with its cheerful, yellow-striped blanket, and soup heated up on the stove, and stupid daytime TV that his mom only ever lets him watch when he's home sick from school.

He wishes that's all it was. That he just got the flu and had to stay home and eat soup and ginger ale and curl up on the couch with blankets until he was better.

But the front window is boarded up, and hard-to-reach papers are still taped to the wall here and there, and his mother can't seem to stay out of the room for more than thirty seconds. She keeps wandering in to straighten a pillow, or grab something off the bookshelf only to replace it two minutes later, or check Will's temperature, or ask if he wants crackers. She touches him every time she passes by, squeezing his shoulder or ruffling his hair, as if to remind herself that he's really there. She doesn't mean to be smothering.

Will twists around to glance at the clock in the kitchen. Mike promised he'd come over after school. They've barely seen each other since *that* day, each family scrambling to deal with the fallout of everything that happened. The others had to go to school. Mike and Nancy had to do some serious negotiations with their parents to explain where they'd been and why their clothes were ruined. Lucas and Max were busy coming up with survival plans in case her stepbrother got a hankering for revenge. Not to mention that Mike and El had just about thrown a fit when Hopper said she had to go back to the cabin right away the next morning.

Mike and El. The thought turns the soup bitter in Will's mouth. He was asleep for the whole time she and Mike had been together, but according to Dustin, they were just about inseparable until Hopper drove her back to the cabin.

They're all keeping in touch over the supercomms, of course, calling in at least daily to check up on each other. It's what they do - at least, what they've done since last year. But also, though no one wants to admit it, they're scared. Will can hear it in the relieved voices of the

other party members when the last person checks in for the night. Too much has happened to all of them, and sleeping is easier with the knowledge that they're all safe in bed somewhere.

On the one hand, Will can't help but blame himself for this. He's the one that disappeared in the first place. He's the reason any of this ever happened. He's the reason behind the nightly group radio calls - the fluctuating worry and relief in his friends' voices.

On the other hand, he doesn't know what he would do without the little ritual. He can't sleep as it is. He stares at the walls, at the ceiling, and turns over and over until the sheets are twisted around his legs, and then kicks them off and then pulls them back up and spends hours wondering if he should turn the lamp off. But he never does. He just gives up and spends the nights curled into the head of his bed, drawing. It's a better alternative than just letting the thoughts - the *memories* - go around and around in his head all night. Or actually sleeping.

The sleeping pills go untouched on his bedside table. He spends the nights drawing, and he naps at various points during the day. Eventually his mother will catch on, and she'll press him to try to sleep at night, to take the pills, not fully understanding how much worse it is to face the nightmares after the sun sets.

But right now it's barely afternoon. Sunlight pours in through the windows, leaving bright-gold rectangles on the floor. Will finishes his soup, taking his time, and then sets the bowl aside, turns down the volume on the TV, and melts down into the old cushions.

He expects to drift off right away, as he usually does. As if eighteen solid hours wasn't enough, he still seems to be behind on rest, and can drop off at any given moment - until the sky darkens. But this time ten minutes go by and he's still staring at the bright print of the blanket, listening to the low sounds of his mother bustling around the house, pretending to be busy.

He wishes he could nap with Mike.

Will blushes, all alone in the living room as he is, and wriggles further under the blanket so that his warm cheeks are hidden.

It's not an unusual pastime for Will - lying in bed when he's trying to sleep, and thinking about Mike Wheeler instead. It's been happening, intentionally and otherwise, since before the demogorgon ever entered his life. When he got back, it became a coping mechanism. When the night is too dark or the wind is too loud against the side of the house or when he wakes up sweating and panting from a nightmare, more often than not he thinks of Mike. It always makes him feel guilty, indulging in these daydreams. Mike would be mortified - angry, even - if he knew that Will daydreamed about a world where they were boyfriends. Where that was allowed.

And more to the point, Mike is his best friend - the best friend he could ever ask for. If Mike ever found out, somehow, well... It would be bad. No more best friend. Probably no more friends, period. But that doesn't stop Will from picturing dark eyes, dark hair, freckles, a smile as familiar as his own hands, and scenarios that would never, ever play out in real life. Simple, harmless things like holding hands or going on a date. Harmless unless you're a boy pining after another boy.

"You look cold," Mike says in Will's imagination. *"Want to share my sleeping bag? Here, there's some room."* And, with a confidence Will could never muster in real life, he crawls across the Wheeler's basement floor and slides into the overlarge sleeping bag beside Mike, curling up against his chest like it's completely natural to want to be held by your best friend while you sleep.

It's one of Will's favorite things to imagine, especially when he can't sleep, because he can snuggle into his pillow and imagine that he's safe and cared for and protected. The way he feels when Mike slings an arm around his shoulders - a habit he's developed in the past few months that Will has absolutely no complaints about. Sometimes it even gets him through the night, and he wakes up feeling more cold and alone than ever.

No, it's nothing new. But for the past three days, it's been a more frequent occurrence than ever. Because now, there's a glimmer of hope that maybe - maybe he isn't the only one. Maybe it's not so impossible. Maybe.

Or maybe not.

He can't tell what's real. But the possibility is exhilarating. And terrifying.

He goes over it yet again, replaying the memory in his mind, trying to recall every detail. Trying to feel out what really happened and what was in his head.

If you have to let go, that's okay. I understand, but I'm asking you to try. Just for a little longer, please try to hold on. I can't lose you again.

That was real. Will's sure of it. He's sure, because the words have been circling in his head for days. And it feels too solid to be imagined. At once too sad and too hopeful for his own mind to come up with just to torment him. Too encouraging to be the Shadow's work.

And too *Mike* to be anything else.

Mike was the only person who told him it was okay to let go if he needed to. That he understood. Everyone else - his mom, Jonathan, Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, even Chief Hopper, told him over and over to hang on. To be strong. To fight. And Will knew that they'd never forgive him if he was too weak to hang on. But Mike - somehow, Will believed Mike completely when he said he understood. He was the *only* person that understood. For reasons Will can't name, hearing that gave him more strength to keep fighting than three dozen "*hang on*"s and "*be strong*"s and "*just a little longer*"s.

I need you.

That part he's marginally sure about. And those words alone would have set his heart off on a tiny pitter-patter, but then -

I love you.

This has to be at least the hundredth time Will has repeated the words in his mind since he woke up in the hospital, but the effect is exactly the same as when he first heard them. Or thought he heard them. His breath hitches just behind the hollow of his throat and he grins into the blanket, hiding the giddy expression in the scratchy material.

Maybe. Maybe.

Golden, fizzy waves of hope slosh together with acidic nerves in Will's chest, leaving a jittery kind of energy behind. He doesn't want to nap anymore. He flings the blanket off, changes his mind, wraps it around him like a cloak and heads for his bedroom. He needs paper. And pencils.

He perches on the very edge of his chair, doodling aimlessly while his thoughts pop around like pinballs. For so long, he's dreamed and wished and prayed for something like this to happen. For Mike to give the slightest indication that they could ever be more than just friends. He never, ever expected that it would actually happen. And - he has to remind himself - it still probably won't. He probably misheard, or imagined it, or Mike meant nothing more than brotherly affection when he wrapped his warm, gangly arms around Will's shoulders. But it's more hope than Will has had in a long time. He accepted long ago that crushes and romance and love were not things he was allowed to participate in.

Not for you, the world seemed to say as a little girl on the playground kissed a boy on the cheek for saving her from a bee.

Not for you, the world seemed to whisper as Dustin and Lucas teased and laughed about their crushes - pretty, long-haired girls whose skirts and lip gloss held no real appeal for Will.

Not for you, the world taunted as Will shuddered in the slimy, colorless replica of Castle Byers, straining to hear if the monster was close and wanting his best friend more than anything else in the world.

Not for you, the world laughed as Mike radioed El every day - every single day - and talked endlessly about her Yoda-like powers and mysterious, dark past and boyishly short hair.

So, he had given up hoping, telling himself he was content with inside jokes and long, involved campaigns and bike rides to the comic store and sleepovers and quiet days doing homework together. Being best friends. And he should be content with that, he should just be happy with that. But he isn't.

He wants to give in to that invisible current pulling him to his best friend and lean into his side. For Mike to wrap his arm around Will's shoulders and pull him close the way that Steve does to Nancy on the Wheeler's living room couch. To be allowed to slip his hand into Mike's and interlace their fingers when he's nervous, gripping Mike's palm to keep himself grounded. To lean up, slightly on tiptoes, and press a quick kiss to the faint freckles on Mike's cheek. To, daringly, dart in one more time to bump their lips together just for a second - a second only, because Will doesn't know if his wildly fluttering heart would be able to handle any more. Or even - he blushes deep red and ducks his head at the thought alone - or even press himself to Mike, toes to chest, and dig his hands up into his dark hair and slot their mouths together the way couples do in movies, all gasping breaths and gripping hands and flushed skin.

But more importantly than all that, to like someone - to love them - and have them love him back. Not like his mother or brother or friends do, but in the way couples love each other. The way that Han and Leia love each other. To share his innermost thoughts with someone - the thoughts he's never, ever voiced aloud - without fear. For someone to understand him.

And now maybe -

Maybe -

He hopes.

Will sets down his pencil to rest his cramping hand, staring at the sketch he created. It's a scene from their last campaign, scribbled roughly in pencil, lines smearing under his hand. The paladin's sword and the cleric's staff are jabbed into the ground, side-by-side, leaning together as the party rests by a campfire. The party itself is a vague collection of figures, not much more than some blocks of shape to suggest human forms. The sword and staff are the main focus, crisply outlined and carefully detailed.

Will makes his decision then and there. He has to know. He has to ask. Now. Today. As soon as Mike knocks on their door, he's going to ask what he meant.

He sets the drawing down carefully, paces into the kitchen to check the time, and almost immediately begins to panic. Because, god, one hour is not nearly enough time to prepare for this conversation. But he's tired of running. Tired of hiding. And he can't - won't - let this *maybe* pass by and become a *could have*.

AN: if you have a moment, I would love to hear what you think :)

4. Kiss the Rains

Mike

A fitful, gusty November rain drums up and down the streets of Hawkins, turning rooftops gray and shining and *plink-plunking* on lawn ornaments and street signs. Autumn leaves turn soggy and slink down the gutters in twos and threes. It only just started raining as school let out, low clouds scuttling over the sky with frightening speed and turning the world soft and silvery with rain without a moment's hesitation. Still, even a moderate amount of rain can wreak absolute havoc on dirt roads, especially ones as shitty and terribly-maintained as the ones at the edge of town. Mike rides a few feet off the road, along a strip of dead and soggy grass. The whirling wheels of his bike fling water up the legs of his jeans and into his shoes. He's pedaling into the wind, bike wobbling between the muddy, rutted road and a ditch-turned-stream.

Mike doesn't mind. He's always kind of liked being out in the rain. It feels cleansing. The rain, the cold. As a kid, he used to stay out in his red galoshes and rubbery raincoat until his mother all but dragged him inside. No, he doesn't really mind the rain, even though the driving wind leaves something to be desired. He's slightly worried about the contents of his backpack, though. Mike may enjoy the rain, but his geography homework certainly doesn't. So he pedals harder, head down, the hood of his jacket having long ago blown down.

He may also be in a hurry to see Will. But that's something he's thought far too much about in the past few days. He's not starting down that train of thought again.

A flash turns the world stark and flat for a split-second, and Mike wipes his bangs out of his eyes as he counts.

One Miss-iss-i-ppi, two Miss-iss-i-ppi, three Miss-iss-i-ppi, four Miss-iss-i-ppi, fi-

Thunder booms and grumbles. It's not close - not yet - but it reverberates through the ground, up the spokes of his bike and through Mike's chilled limbs, and he's grateful when he swings

around the corner and passes the Byers' crooked mailbox.

He glides all the way to the porch, wheels clicking cheerfully, and dismounts directly onto the first step.

The door swings open almost immediately after Mike raps on the wood with chilled knuckles, and he grins. "Geez, give me a heart attack, why don't you?"

"Sorry," Will says, and smiles back. That's a good sign; Will hasn't smiled much just lately.

And Mike's heart is beating a little harder than normal, his pulse in his fingertips as he steps through the door, but it isn't entirely due to being startled. After all, the thing he's been trying not to think about is staring him right in the face. He even finds himself gnawing at the dry skin of his lower lip as Will closes the door behind him - which is entirely stupid, because it's Will. It's just Will. Mike has never been nervous around him before, and he's certainly not going to start because of... of...

He wipes his hands on a dry-ish corner of his jacket, but they stay damp even after the rainwater is absorbed.

"That happened fast," Will comments, nodding to the window, and Mike makes a noise of agreement as he kicks off his sopping shoes by the door.

"Yeah, it started just as school got out."

For a moment there's silence, and it's uncomfortably close to being awkward. Mike pushes his dripping hair off his forehead, feeling like every single thought he had on the night El came back is written on his face in black marker.

Will seems nervous, too. High-strung. His fingers are fiddling with the hem of his shirt, and he's shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Rocking back and forth the way he's done since he was a kid. But some of the tension in Mike's chest loosens, because Will looks better. Better than last time they saw each other, at least. He's traded pajamas for a plaid shirt and jeans, and his hair is ever-so-slightly

damp, as if he just recently showered. The bags under his eyes aren't quite as pronounced as when Mike visited briefly a couple days ago.

"Feeling better?"

Will shrugs, but smiles. "A little." Then his eyebrows pull together, and in the next moment he's laughing. "You're dripping everywhere."

And then the awkwardness dries up all at once, and Will is pulling Mike through the hallway and shoving a towel into his hands with a shake of his head. Joyce waves hello from the kitchen table as they pass, her palms trailing over a slew of papers and envelopes. Their eyes meet for a moment, and Mike is thrown back to that moment in the shed, just after he hugged Will, when he met Joyce's eyes and wondered how much she heard.

In the bathroom, Mike makes a show of shaking water out of his hair like a dog, and Will's smile fades into a slight frown of concentration as he watches Mike try to wring the water out of his jacket and into the sink.

"You can borrow a sweater if you want. I think I have a hand-me-down from Jonathan that would fit you."

"Nah." Mike shrugs, hanging both the towel and his jacket up to dry on the towel rack. "I'll be fine."

When he turns to the hallway, Will blocks him with serious eyes. "You can't be cold."

Mike takes one look at the sheen of worry in his best friend's eyes and inwardly kicks himself. Of course Will would be worried about the cold. In fact, the whole storm probably set him on edge, after the red storm he saw in his nightmares.

So he curses himself, and he lets Will hand him a well-worn, blue-ish sweatshirt and heat a kettle for hot chocolate and wrap them both in throw blankets. It's as they're standing around in the kitchen, waiting for the water to boil, that Joyce stands with a sigh.

"Hey," she says, and drifts past to ruffle both their hair and reach for the can of hot chocolate mix. Her own hair is in mild disarray, as if

she's been pulling her fingers through it. "Would you boys mind if I nip out for a moment? I should go pick up Jonathan."

Will takes the can with a tilt of his head. "I thought he was gonna stay to develop some pictures."

She nods, already halfway to the front door. "This rain isn't getting any better. I don't want him walking in it." There's the jangle of car keys, and then she's striding back into the kitchen, one arm in her coat. She hugs Will, gets her coat the rest of the way on, and, after a brief second of hesitation, gives Mike a half-hug too. She's gone before he can return it, leaving behind only a shout to stay safe and the faint scent of cigarette smoke.

"She's just worried," Will says as the door closes behind her. He starts spooning the powder into two mugs. The very tip of the spoon wiggles, betraying his shaking hands. "After - everything. She likes everyone being under one roof. Marshmallow?"

They end up perched on the edge of Will's bed, chatting and flipping through some of Will's drawings. Something in the air shifted when Joyce left, and Mike can't stop himself from glancing up far more often than he should. He's sitting in the exact spot that he was four days ago, when he rubbed the pad of his thumb along the chalky edge of a shell and realized that he had a crush on William Byers. Now, his eyes flick between that shell on the bedside table, the drawing in Will's hands, and Will's face.

This is the first time they've had more than a few minutes together since the shed. Mike can't help but trace Will's features, over and over, as if reassuring himself that he's here. Solid and real and warm and alive. His hair has dried entirely by now, and it lies across his forehead in a soft fringe. A clean, soapy, floral scent hangs around him, mixing with the rich-sweet smell of hot chocolate as they bend their heads over the drawings. Something warm creeps along Mike's chest, spreading to his fingertips and settling high in his cheekbones. It's as familiar as Will's voice - something as routine as biking to school. Mike resists the urge to bring a hand to his warm cheeks, wondering why he never thought anything of it before.

"Mike?"

Will is looking at him curiously, and Mike realizes all at once that he's been staring right through Will's face and off into space for who knows how long. He blinks to clear his head and his cheeks grow even warmer.

"Sorry. Zoned out for a minute."

Will nods, takes a long sip of hot chocolate, and sets the mug aside. The round fringe of his hair bounces slightly as he looks down. His fingers toy with the corner of the paper, and he hesitates before flipping it. The nervous rocking starts up again, Will's arm nudging Mike's a couple times before he seems to consciously suppress the motion.

Mike's mouth opens to ask what's wrong, but Will speaks abruptly before he can get the words out.

"It's the party. When we camped by the river, before we found the cave?"

Mike nods. He remembers the campaign. But his attention is on the drawing. The clean, white paper and silvery-gray pencil strokes seem to mingle and meld with the trickle and *shush* of rain on the roof. And Mike knows, somehow, that this drawing is special. It's fairly rough, lines blurring together, eraser smudges here and there. But he can feel it, can sense a definite and immediate difference in how Will holds the paper, voice almost imperceptibly uneven as he points out the crisply-detailed sword and staff in the foreground. This drawing clearly means something to Will - means *more* to him than the other drawings.

"Here's your sword - the one you got in that treasure hoard, with the ruby in the hilt."

Hazel eyes flash up to Mike's, waiting for a nod of approval before he moves on. Mike shifts for a better view, and that familiar warmth concentrates where their arms and shoulders press together. Nervous energy seems to radiate from Will like ribbons tied to a fan, fluttering and snapping and brushing against Mike like tangible things, and Mike's arm twitches with a sudden compulsion to wrap around the smaller boy's shoulders. To calm him. To ground him. To offer some

comfort.

"And my staff," Will says. The words are strange and clipped, as if he planned to say more but gave up on the sentence halfway through.

"With the elvish ribbons and everything," Mike notes, touching the very tip of one finger to the paper. He barely dares to touch it. There's an electricity in the air, like static, raising the hair on Mike's arms and prickling at the back of his neck. It's the anticipatory tension just before a lightning strike, or just after the lights dim in a movie theater; the knowledge that something is about to happen. He feels like if he nudges the paper too hard, some cosmic bolt will come loose and everything will come crashing down.

"It -" Will swallows, then takes a half-breath and starts over. "I drew it 'cause -"

The mug of hot chocolate feels too heavy in Mike's hand, and he leans across Will to set it beside the shells. When he straightens, he turns his gaze from the drawing to the artist. Will almost never explains his drawings. There's never a "because." They speak for themselves, often because Will struggles to describe in words what he does in pictures. He's struggling now, visibly working his jaw around the words before letting them out.

"Because it's - we're - um. Because I'm - I was happy you were with me. When everything was happening."

His thin shoulders slump in obvious relief, probably glad to have gotten it over with, and a smile pulls up the corner of Mike's lips even as his head tilts in curiosity. He could have sworn - for just a moment, he could have sworn -

Something else, something different, something more.

He's wondered, before. Briefly and without much gravity, but he has wondered. Every once in a while, when Will stared down at his hands when the conversation turned to girls; or when Troy hissed a slur in the hallway; or when Will called himself weird, his fake smile betraying the joking tone. Or when a hug lasted a few seconds longer than necessary. Or when Mike looked up with the insistent feeling

that, had he been a split-second faster, he would have caught a pair of hazel eyes on him.

Or when Will's breath caught and his eyes lit up behind the iron-fisted control of the Mind Flayer, just after Mike blurted a truth he hadn't even realized.

He wondered.

He wonders now.

And his heart starts to pick up pace again.

They're still staring down at the drawing, throw blankets halfway through falling off their shoulders, the rain drumming a soft white noise over their heads, when Will's shoulders draw together again. Mike feels, as well as sees, him take a long breath and let it out. The static in the air shifts up a notch, humming like feedback from a speaker. Thunder crackles, a little closer than before, and Will twitches against Mike's shoulder.

"I thought... When it had me, I thought I heard something, but I might have just imagined it." Will won't meet Mike's eyes, but his head keeps moving slightly, as if he wants to. His voice is strained. "I'm not sure. I can't tell what's real."

No clarification is needed. Mike knows. His whole head flushes hot, ears included, and part of him wants to quickly change the subject, or even get up and run. Anything to avoid this tender, giddy, frightening, and still startlingly *new* subject. But another part of him - a bigger part - wants to stay. He has to explain himself. He *wants* to explain himself. Mike Wheeler is no coward. He's a man of action. Not afraid to confront issues - not like his father. Nothing like his father. So if they're going to talk about it, fine. Good. This is... good. He scuffs his palms along his jeans. Maybe he can even get some answers of his own.

But that's second. First, he owes Will an explanation.

He opens his mouth full of good intentions, gets bashful at the last second, and ducks the subject. "Thought you heard what?"

Damn it, Michael, he sighs to himself.

Beside him, Will hems and haws. The paper crinkles in his hands and he eventually sets the whole pile on the pillow. When he turns back, his face is about the same shade of red that Mike's probably is.

"You were talking to me. You said... you asked me to hold on."

Mike's chin dips in a nod. His mouth is dry, the aftertaste of chocolate too thick on his tongue. He's unbalanced. Unsure. He usually has such a gift for words, knowing how to explain things, how to phrase things, but now his mind is completely blank.

Maybe Will sees that he isn't going to reply, because he pushes on, "Then - you said -"

In Mike's peripheral vision, Will's hands give a small, panicked flutter. Something rises in Mike's throat, a tiny noise getting stuck behind his jaw. He wants to take the shaking hands into his own, squeeze them and say, *It's okay, you don't have to say it. I know. I remember.* But somehow, this feels too important to stop.

"What you said after that," Will says. It's almost a whisper. "Did you mean it?"

"Of course," is Mike's instant reaction, and Will's head gives a little jerk. "You're my best friend."

The expression that flashes across Will's face for just an instant is like a punch to Mike's gut. It's akin to disappointment, but slashed across with something sharp and dull all at once. Something Mike can only describe as *heartbroken*. And then he's smiling again. That small, false smile that only comes out when he's *really* upset. "Right. Yeah."

Will starts to lean away, to wedge a space between them that wasn't there before, and a spike of panic lances through Mike's chest.

"But -" he blurts, and his arm darts out like a snake. They both look down in surprise at their linked hands.

Years of vague suspicions and wordless glances and warm cheeks pile up around Mike's head like snow. They blur his vision with

unfinished and unanswered questions. *Is he...? Does he...? Could we...? Do I...?*

He's teetering this way and that, back and forth. Normal and not normal. Safe and risky. Familiarity and possibility.

His eyes wander to Will's hands. They're gripping his knees now, probably to stop the shaking, knuckles and fingertips white. Last time they saw each other, bandages hid the worst of Will's rope-burned, bruised and torn wrists. This time they're exposed. It's from the restraints - from when they were burning the Mind Flayer out of him. And just like that Mike's mind is made up. He's going to try. He's not going to ignore how much Will means to him - not after almost losing him again. And after everything... Well. There are stranger things than this. He's going to try.

Will has been watching his face with something between hope and dull disappointment, and now Mike looks right into his eyes and says, "I don't know if - I mean, you don't have to - I don't even know if you _."

I'm bad at this, he thinks, shaking his head in annoyance. With words failing, he decides to act instead, slowly softening his hard grip on Will's hand and intertwining their fingers. Such a simple action should be the easiest thing he's done all day. It's not. It takes about as much concentration and effort as sprinting for a mile straight, and it leaves his heart in the same frenzied state.

His hands are still a little clammy, but Will doesn't seem to care. He's staring down at their linked fingers with huge eyes, barely moving at all, and a slimy, uncomfortable feeling starts wriggling in Mike's gut. What if he was wrong? What if he misjudged everything entirely? He feels numb and hypersensitive at the same time, aware of the old, stiff mattress below them and the creak of wind against the house and the near-silent whistle of Will's shaky breaths.

A warm, hard squeeze. Will squeezed his hand. Happiness swoops in his stomach, the triumphant, golden feeling just this side of dizzying. Mike could punch the air in victory if he wasn't so frozen in place. He strokes his thumb softly across the back of Will's hand, instead, hoping it conveys everything in his jumbled mind.

Maybe. Maybe.

Is he...? Does he...? Could we...? Do I...?

Mike tries again.

"I know Hawkins isn't always the best place for -" He glances down at their hands again, and when he looks up Will's eyes are huge and his lips are just slightly parted. The direct eye contact is overwhelming, and Mike's head dips away shyly. "For... people like us -" His heart takes off all over again, because *he said it, he said it, he lumped himself in with them, he admitted it, he's terrified and giddy and* - "But - if you want - we could try."

The words are intentionally vague, because he wants to offer - he does, he really does, he's been thinking it over for days and he didn't think this conversation would happen so soon but now that it is he wants to say it before he loses his nerve, but -

But.

His vague suspicions were never confirmed. Will may not even like boys. And there's certainly no good reason to think he'd like *him*, Mike Wheeler the frog-faced boy who -

Will lunges forward like he's about to shove Mike off the bed, like he probably deserves, but instead Mike finds both of his hands gripped tightly in Will's, and there's something desperate in the green-brown eyes that are suddenly so much nearer.

"Please say it." His eyes won't leave Mike's. They flick back and forth, searching. Mike feels as if he's being X-rayed. It sends a not-unpleasant shiver down his scalp. "Please, Mike, I - I need to be sure about this."

And Mike isn't sure exactly what Will wants him to say - he's not even sure exactly what he was saying in the first place - so he lets himself stare back and be engulfed by memories instead. A swing set, a crayon box, a broken arm, sleeping bags, 20-sided dice, hours-long conversations over supercomms, bikes, a monster, a body pulled from the water, a hospital room, lingering glances, too-frequent touches, a

promise of solidarity on Halloween, and now, two hands joined and shaky breaths stirring the air between them. And a smile pulls Mike's lips up without him meaning to, because there's something that just feels *right*, and all at once he's not scared anymore. Nervous and jittery and *what the hell am I doing*, but he's not scared. It's Will. It's just Will.

He focuses back in on the present, and he says it. Because he wants Will to know - even if this all goes badly, even if he was completely wrong, even if everything goes to hell - he wants to say it, wants to let it out of his head. And this time it's completely intentional.

"I love you."

Will's fingers give a hard twitch. His eyes widen. Nerves and adrenaline and uncertainty churn in Mike's stomach.

Moisture glimmers in Will's eyes and all the tension in the air shatters in an instant. His voice is a weak croak when he opens his mouth. "You mean it?"

Mike's nod is more a slump of potent, lightheaded relief than an actual motion of muscles, but the sentiment is there all the same.

The moisture runs over, and Will smiles the biggest, purest, most simply happy smile that Mike has ever seen - the uncomplicated and pure-hearted happiness of a child who has been granted their deepest wish. Tears mix into weak bubbles of laughter, and Will's hands squeeze again as he says, "I love you, too."

It's stupid, but with how full Mike's chest is, the best response he can come up with is a wobbly laugh and, "Well, glad we got that cleared up."

And Will is much closer than he was a second ago, pulling up just short of Mike's face as if remembering at the last minute to whisper, "Can I...?"

Mike nods, eager and disbelieving and shy, and then Will is kissing him.

Warmth. Gentle pressure. Bumped noses and closed lips. An ecstatic,

fidgety energy thrumming through his whole body, half novelty and half history.

He knows immediately that he did the right thing. The last of his lingering doubts melt away under the warm, gentle presence that is *Will*, because this feels right. This is right. It should be strange to be kissing his best friend - kissing a boy at all - it should feel alien or uncomfortable or wrong or just kind of *off*, but it doesn't. Mike's heart is hammering in the best way and he smiles so much that he breaks the kiss by accident, and then they're laughing breathlessly, noses still touching, and it feels like coming home after a long, harrowing journey. Except, it feels like coming home for the first time, which is impossible - but then again, what else is new.

5. Blanket Fort Secrets

Will

"Please say it. Please, Mike, I - I need to be sure about this."

Will can tell he's squeezing Mike's hands too hard, but he can't let go. His heart throbs in his throat. He can't move. He can't sit still. Bursts of energy crawl along his skin, curl up his spine, unfold in the squirming pit of his stomach. He's been wishing, hoping, *pleading*, and now that there's a chance - now that there's a physical manifestation of his hopes right in front of him, warm fingers squeezed into Will's palms, saying things that Will never dared hope for - he's scared. So intensely, sickeningly scared that he's wrong. That this could all vanish again in an instant.

Mike takes a half-breath, lips parting just slightly as if he's about to say something, but then he stops. Adrenaline shoots from the pit of Will's stomach to the base of his skull. He needs Mike to say something, anything, just to break them out of this uncertain limbo.

The words keep playing in Will's head, over and over, looping as he picks through them for meaning.

I know Hawkins isn't always the best place for... people like us, but - if you want - we could try.

People like us. *Us*.

He said we could try, Will thinks, wildly, without quite meaning to. *He said we could try.*

He doesn't mean.

Can't mean.

Or.

Can he?

No. He can't.

But his voice - his voice had been so soft. The kind of *impossibly* soft that Will has only ever heard once before, when Mike repeated, "You said yes," in the shed.

Will wants to say yes again, more than anything, wants to scream it from the rooftops, but he has horrible visions of Mike leaping up from the bed and backing away in disgust. Head shaking. Eyes hard. Lips twisting in an expression of betrayal. "*What's wrong with you?*" Mike spits in Will's imagination, and Will's eyes flicker down to their joined hands for reassurance, and *no, no, please no, not that* -

He's holding on too tight. He knows he is. But he *wants*, and Mike's hand in his is the only physical evidence he has of that glimmer of hope. And he's desperate. After the Shadow, after everything, he needs something, a good thing, he needs -

Then he's looking into Mike's eyes again and something has shifted. It's only been a few heartbeats, but it feels like Mike has been silent for hours. Whatever thought that had been on Mike's tongue has faded now. His lips are closed, his eyes distant. He blinks, and all at once he's looking at Will the way he's always wanted him to. Soft and searching and intense, cheeks rounding with that gentle, crooked smile that's entirely *Mike*.

He's been chewing on his lower lip. Will can hardly think, but his mind catches on this little detail. There's a patch of shiny, raw skin, just off-center on Mike's lower lip.

"I love you."

A strong, small jolt goes through Will's body. This isn't what he expected. This isn't at *all* what he expected. He expected something like, "*I think I might like boys, I don't know,*" or, more likely, "*What do you mean? We're best friends. Just best friends. Let go of me.*" But instead -

"I love you."

A massive sheet of tension in Will's chest gives way, and the relief that follows is so potent that it leaves him lightheaded. He's trembling, weak, warm. Because after everything, there's this. This

impossible thing. This wonderful, impossible thing. After all the words he heard from his father's mouth before he even learned their meaning. After every shove and hissed insult in the school hallways. After the notes pulled from his locker; the late nights that bled into early mornings lying awake, wondering what he had done to turn out so *wrong*; all the too-casual, carefully-worded comments from his mother that doubtless came from good intent but almost always missed their mark. After every tiny little thing reminding him of what he could never have. Couples holding hands, paper valentines, friends giggling over crushes. And then, after the monster. After the dark and the cold and the slime. The spores and the terror and the emptiness, the loneliness. After the slugs, the lies, the scientists, the nightmares. After the flashbacks, after the Shadow, after the fire, after the gate.

After everything, there's this. There's a boy with dark eyes and freckle-dusted cheekbones who loves him - who *loves* him, and Will knows it's too good to be true but he believes it anyway, he believes -

His heart is beating so hard he can feel it against his ribs -

He can only croak when his mouth opens.

"You mean it?"

There's the briefest moment of silence, of stillness, as their eyes catch and hold. Rain sighs over the roof and burbles in the gutters. The smell of it still clings to Mike's clothes, fresh and cool and clean, mud-and-thunder meshing with the thick-sweet smell of cooling hot chocolate. The moment ends, Mike's hands go soft in Will's, and he gives his answer in a nod.

Hot tears streak down Will's cheeks even as bubbles of loose, warm laughter pop up his throat. He opens his mouth and it comes out easily, effortlessly. "I love you too."

It feels like a victory.

Only now, four full days since he expelled the Shadow from his veins with a searing scream, does it finally feel like they've won.

And Will knows, completely and all at once, that despite everything,

he's glad that he survived.

Mike's cheeks are a deep, delicate pink, a dimple appearing just under the corner of his mouth when he grins. "Well," he says, his voice wobbling slightly, "Glad we got that cleared up."

Curling hair, sweat-damp fingers, the smell of rain and chocolate, pink cheeks. And that sweet, lopsided smile. Will *wants*. And for once in his life, he's going to take.

He catches himself just in time to stop and whisper, "Can I...?" He doesn't remember when he leaned in, but they're already so close that Mike's eager nod nearly bumps their foreheads together. And that's it. That's all Will needs.

He's dreamed of doing this for so long that he's almost disappointed when it's not perfect. Almost.

Actually, no, this is nowhere near disappointment. He probably bumps their lips too hard, and he half-misses, and he doesn't know what to do with his hands, but, dammit, it is perfect. It's happening. That alone makes it perfect.

It's happening.

The initial split-second realization passes, and sensations pour over Will in a continuous stream, all jumbled and melded together. The immediate, gentle burn of red-flushed cheeks. His pulse in his ears. The smooth-rough pressure of chapped lips against his. The nagging feeling that he's going to wake up at any second. But when he opens his eyes, Mike is still there, smiling so widely that the dimple is back, eyes fluttering away shyly. They're still so close that Mike is little more than a blur, and when they laugh Will can feel Mike's breath on his lips like a ghost of a kiss.

He's almost *timid*, Will realizes with an affectionate little rush. Mike - the dynamic storyteller, the confident Dungeon Master, the natural leader - is blushing and ducking his head and looking up at Will through his eyelashes, and Will thinks he could fall all over again then and there.

It fascinates him so, that timid little smile, that Will just can't stop himself from leaning in again, and a third time, and he can't believe it, he just can't believe it, and this has to be a dream but if it is he's going to get as many kisses as he can before he wakes up. He can file them away, save them, store them in the back of his mind for bad nights. They'll help tremendously, he can already tell.

In some strange way, he's reminded of the Shadow - of the first moment it took him. Now, like then, every single sense is taken over, the outside world blocked out, thoughts turned fuzzy, time warped. But this is different - of course it is. It's the complete opposite. Instead of the Shadow, it's Mike. Instead of a piercing, tingling cold forcing its way beneath his skin, it's warmth, spreading softly and easily. Safe and gentle and careful, innocent and curious. And Will welcomes this takeover completely. It feels cleansing. Like everywhere Mike's skin brushes his, the chill of the Shadow melts away - if only for a moment. He wants to wrap his arms around Mike and press himself as close as he can, nuzzling into the warmth. The impulse would make him blush if he wasn't already as red as possible, and it brings him halfway back to his senses.

He leans away, forcing himself to cut it off after three kisses, because *jeez, Byers, way to overwhelm him immediately.*

Mike just keeps smiling that soft, wide, disbelieving smile, and after taking a deep breath he kind of hiccups, "Oh, my god. What?"

Will giggles back, "I don't know," and then they're both laughing into their hands, giddy and giggly and breathless, as if they just hit a sugar high. They laugh at nothing, at everything, at the whole situation, and Will finds himself in a feedback loop of tentative joy and astonishment. It takes a few minutes to calm down. Neither of them say much, and the relative silence is as comfortable as the old yellow couch in the other room. There's a sense of familiarity, nestled right up against the fragile *newness*. As if they've been doing this for years. Or maybe it's just Mike. Maybe it's just that Will has been by Mike's side for so long that he fits there like a puzzle piece, like second nature. It feels *right*.

"Sorry," Mike says eventually, tugging his hands away to rub them on the knees of his jeans. "My hands are all sweaty."

"s okay," Will says, and rubs his own hands over his eyes. He's been smiling so hard and laughing so much that his cheeks and sides ache. It's a good ache. He breathes it in, holds it, and releases it while Mike picks up his cold mug and swirls the liquid absently. The faded blue sweatshirt - Jonathan's originally, before it became a hand-me-down - fits him better than it ever fit Will. Some small, strange corner of him hopes fervently that Mike keeps it. That he wears it. Maybe it's the tentative beginnings of an impulse to mark, to claim in some small way. No one would know - they'd just see a graying, loose-collared blue sweatshirt with holes fraying at the cuffs - but Will would know. He'd see Michael Wheeler wearing *his* sweatshirt. He'd see a confirmation that today was real. That it happened.

Maybe it's just the aftereffects of the uncontrollable bout of laughter - or maybe the kisses - but for the first time in a while it feels like things are going to be okay.

The front door opens with a familiar click-and-squeak and Will jumps about six feet straight up. Mike gives a jerk too, twitching away by a few inches instinctively, and Will surges off the bed and to his bedroom door. He's a few seconds too late. His mother and Jonathan are already in the kitchen, a couple grocery bags hanging from the crooks of their elbows. They must have stopped by the store to stock up in case the storm knocks out the power. The idea sends a shadow across Will's ecstatic demeanor, like a cloud slipping over the sun.

This actually counts in his favor, because in the next moment Jonathan is poking his head into the hallway and saying, "Hey, bud," and Will doesn't want to answer any questions about the energy bubbling just under his expression. Not yet. Not even vague, half-truth answers. It's too new, too precious, too completely unbelievable. So he keeps the idea of a power outage in the forefront of his mind to tamp down the grin that threatens to take over his face.

"Hey," he answers, wondering if his voice really sounds as strange as it feels.

A tall, warm presence appears just behind Will's shoulder, sending a bout of (stupid, ridiculous) butterflies through his stomach, and Jonathan lifts a hand in greeting.

"Hey, Mike."

If he recognizes the sweatshirt, he gives no indication of it.

Mike

Mike has never been a huge dog person, but when Chester comes bounding in, drawn by the smell of groceries on their way to the fridge, he swears then and there that he'll buy the biggest bone the pet store has at the soonest opportunity. Because while Joyce dives for the dog's collar, tugging him away from a dropped package of sausage with reprimands on her tongue, Will gets a chance to breathe and reset his expression.

Will has been an awful liar since he was little. When they emerged from his room to give the obligatory greetings and small talk, it took approximately sixty seconds for Joyce to notice something was up.

"Everything okay?" she asked, eyes sliding between Mike's restless hands and Will's fruitless attempts at controlling his expression.

And Will, evidently prepared for a slightly different phrasing of the question, blurted, "Nothing. I mean, yeah. Fine."

Mike failed at containing a nervous giggle, and Joyce turned her puzzled eyes on Jonathan, who just shrugged and glanced at Will. She opened her mouth to say something else, and Mike could only think, *Well, this is it. We're caught. It was good while it lasted.*

Cue the dog.

Now, as Joyce snatches the sausage off the floor and releases the white furball with a shake of her head, Mike thanks the powers that be that Chester decided to wake up from his nap when he did. He goes gallivanting around the room with the kind of simple joy that only a dog greeting his owners can achieve. Tail whipping their knees, licking hands at random. Will kneels to scrub his palms over the mutt's fuzzy head, and when he stands, he's managed to wrestle his face into something approaching neutral. Mike carefully avoids looking at him, knowing perfectly well that if they lock eyes they'll

burst out into laughter.

Either the incident is pushed aside by more important concerns in Joyce's mind - the storm, dinner plans, whether Will is feeling any better - or she chooses not to mention it again. By the time they're allowed to retreat back to Will's room, Mike's pulse has finally slowed, and he's able to look Will in the face without having to immediately look away again. The energy between them has shifted, winding down to a low hum, and Mike feels as though he could dip his hands in it if he reached out.

Will's eyebrows rise as he pushes the door shut behind them, and he lets out an emphatic breath. Mike makes a face back, silently agreeing: *That went about as well as could be expected.*

The rain lashes against the windowpanes and they both turn to the sound. The room is warm, but gooseflesh spreads over the back of Will's neck under the fringe of his hair.

"What if we build a blanket fort?" Mike says abruptly.

Will turns back in surprise, and then a smile pulls up the corners of his mouth. "Yeah?" he says, and Mike is already moving to the bed, raiding it for building materials.

"Yeah."

And that's that.

Moving helps. Doing something helps. It keeps his hands busy and gives them something to talk about besides what just happened - and Mike is still struggling to absorb exactly *what* just happened. Plus, Will flinches imperceptibly every time thunder shakes the house, and this is something Mike can do to help. He couldn't kill the demogorgon or stop the Mind Flayer or close the gate - he couldn't go with El to the lab and he couldn't go with Will to the cabin - he couldn't protect them, he couldn't keep the promises he made, he couldn't do *anything* - but he can do this. He can drag couch cushions in to make a floor and string up blankets and gather pillows and strategically position chairs as support beams. He can build a warm, safe place for his best friend. Crush. Something. Whatever.

They fill their arms with supplies as if they're headed into the deep woods for a week, not a large-ish blanket fort that has taken over a whole half of Will's small room. Flashlights, soda, trail mix, comic books, Will's sketchbook and pencils, cards, the tape player, and homework that they definitely won't be glancing at. Chester pokes his nose in, his tail nearly taking down one blanket wall before they shoo him out of the room and shut the door.

Will crawls in first, and Mike follows. The password, they agree, is *Alderaan*.

A stupid, irrational hesitance has turned Mike's limbs heavy, and he falls all over himself as they settle into the overly-cushioned space. Will hovers a few inches away, then seems to change his mind and nudges his way under Mike's arm, glancing up as if for permission.

"That's fine, I didn't need that shoulder," Mike jokes, and Will *thumps* his head back against the offending body part with a teasing, sideways smile.

Ever since that first half-hug in the hospital room, the day Chief Hopper carried Will out of the Upside Down, Mike has found reassurance in touching Will. Elbows bumping at the cafeteria table meant *I'm here*. Will's spontaneous hugs during a campaign, complete with his signature, fluttering pat on the back, meant *I'm safe*. Standing side-by-side in the AV room, hands resting on the table and thumbs just barely brushing, meant *I'm okay*. Maybe it's selfish, or stupid - and Mike doesn't want to hover, he knows Will gets that enough from his mom - but ever since the Upside Down, those little touches have meant more than he'd like to admit. Now is no exception. The past hour - has it really been a whole hour? Has it *only* been an hour? - feels surreal, dreamlike. But Will never gets this close - well, never used to. He always kept a careful three-inch buffer between them, never coming closer than was "proper." That buffer has been abandoned now.

Will's thin frame, solid and warm, is unquestionably real under Mike's arm. A confirmation that everything else is real. The drawing, the confessions, the *I love yous*, the - Mike shifts, bashful and antsy at the memory - the kisses. That they happened. And Mike can't help but balk a little at just how much that reassures him.

The silence stretches out, but neither one of them reaches for a comic book or the bowl of trail mix. Mike racks his brain for something to say, for a way to get back on the train of thought from before Joyce and Jonathan came home, but Will seems perfectly content to rest his head against Mike's shoulder and gaze at the soft, multi-colored walls of the fort.

Will's distant smile crinkles into a frown as he watches, and Mike tilts his head, anticipating a change of topic.

"What about -" Will starts, and cuts off almost in the middle of the word. His eyes trace the blanket fort again, this time framed by furrowed brows. He avoids Mike's questioning glance. "El," he finishes after a few moments, flatly.

El. Mike only got to see her for a few hours, total, before she was whisked away again in the passenger seat of Hopper's car.

She had been exhausted. Chief Hopper, apparently, had to carry her into the Byers' house just a little while after Mike and Will both passed out on the bed. She slept late into the morning, only dragging herself off the couch a few times to find the restroom and get a glass of water. When she finally woke up to the hustle and bustle of moving the still-sleeping Will to the hospital, late in the morning, she looked awful. Hair in disarray, stiff and oily from the remnants of hair gel. Eyes dull and sunken from exhaustion, face paper-white and crusted with dark, crackling dried blood, clothes heavy with the smell of the lab. Smoke and blood and antiseptic and the foul slime of the Upside Down.

Mike hugged her as hard as he could and didn't let go until Hopper tapped him on the shoulder.

"Told you you wouldn't lose me," she had whispered, and when he let go, a smile had broken through the bleary haze of her eyes.

A flurry of questions and half-answers and worries and explanations flew between them, words bumping and tangling in the space, sentences overlapping and blurring. *Why, where, when, how, who.* They were short on time, and they both knew it, and there was so *much* to say. Somehow, through clasped hands and searching eyes

and jumbled words spoken at the same time, they pieced together a rough semblance of a timeline.

I thought you were stuck in the -

I got out. Portal. Where it came through. I -

They were asking about you, I wouldn't -

I saw you. I wanted to -

- called you every night -

- hid in the forest -

- probably wouldn't have survived without your help. He had to stay in the hospital for like a week -

- so cold -

- missed you. We all -

- found me. Let me stay in the cabin. He's a friend. He -

And all too soon, before Mike could quite absorb what was happening, she was gone again. Bundled into the police chief's car, nodding off again with her chin tucked into her palm before Mike could properly say goodbye.

In the hectic days that followed, when Will was in the hospital and the rest of the party was either grounded or scrambling to come up with explanations to their parents - or both - Mike thought. Without his permission, his mind ran comparison after comparison after comparison until his head ached. He radioed El every evening, nearly choking on spit in shock the first time her voice came through the static. They talked for hours, about inconsequential things. School and TV shows and favorite foods.

And with both of the people he cares most about out of reach - El hidden away in her cabin, Will in the hospital - Mike turned to his idol for help. For advice. Someone brave, wise, kind, and loyal. Someone powerful. A Jedi.

Search your feelings.

So he did.

He searched, and first he found relief. Immense, overwhelming relief that she was alive, in this dimension, warm and safe and whole. That he didn't have to stay awake at night, wondering. Worrying. Fearing. For the first time in a long time, the cloud of tension around him dissipated - a weight lifted from his shoulders, his chest, allowing him to breathe. To relax, and focus on other things.

After relief, he found happiness. Affection. Disbelief. A tinge of bitter anger - *she never answered me. If she had answered just once, just once, then maybe* -

But, though he searched for it, he couldn't find anything that felt like exactly like the so-very-familiar connection... the love - he may as well use the right word, now that he's accepted it - that he has for his best friend.

Now, Mike mulls everything over in his head, selecting the right words. Will still hasn't looked at him. In fact, he's barely moved at all.

"Before," he starts, picking through the sentence with slow intention. "All I could ever think about was... was whether or not she was okay." He waits for a nod of acknowledgement, but Will is stiff and motionless under his right arm. "I thought she was still there. In - you know. In the Upside Down. Or - well, I didn't think she was dead. I wouldn't." His head swings back and forth as he huffs out, "I was so worried. It's better now that I know she's okay. Now that I can actually talk to her."

Will, finally, gives a small nod. Then, after a few seconds - "You like her." His tone is stilted, unreadable. Like the words got caught partway between a statement, a question, and an accusation.

"Yeah."

Mike shrugs, jostling Will's head slightly. No point denying that. But there's a defeated slant to Will's shoulders that wasn't there a second ago, and it sends Mike's hands twitching into action before he even

thinks about it. He takes Will by the shoulders, palms firm on the soft plaid fabric, and turns him. He has to duck his head to catch Will's downcast eyes.

"El - she's really important to me. She's a great friend. She saved us."

"Twice," Will interjects with a half-smile.

"Yeah. She's awesome. And I was really, really glad to have her back. But I don't -" He stumbles over the important part, makes a face at himself, and pushes through. "I've been thinking about it all week and - it's just - it's different. Last year, I met El and - I liked her. Yeah. I mean, come on. Superpowers."

This is meant to draw out another smile, but Will just nods glumly. Mike realizes he's gnawing on his lip, slowly picking at a dry piece of skin, and he releases it with a long exhale.

"But I think I've liked you for a lot longer."

A crease appears between Will's brows, his eyes flick back and forth, and then his head lifts. The confusion chips away and something like sunshine begins to peek through the cracks. "Really?"

Meanwhile, Mike's heart has apparently turned into a wild stallion, and he wishes it would just *relax*. It was adrenaline that got the words out - words he's been sliding into place like a cipher, one by one, over the past few days - and this is the price. He's been so fixated on this realization, turning it over and over in his mind, examining it from every possible angle, that saying it aloud should have been easier. But somehow, saying the words, even at low volume in the warm, muted confines of a blanket fort, makes everything feel so much more real. Less like a dream.

I meant what I said. That's what he means to say. But when he opens his mouth he can already tell that his voice would crack, and he's said so much today. He's been trying so hard to articulate everything that's been happening in his head over the past week - the past year, to be honest - and he feels as though his words are about used up.

So instead of talking, he moves his hands from Will's shoulders and

lets them hover just over his cheeks, asking for approval with a quirk of eyebrows. Will all but caves into him, nodding with a sharp release of both breath and tension, shoulders dropping. Mike maps out the curve of Will's lower lip with the pad of a thumb as he leans in - he doesn't want to almost miss like they did the first time. He's definitely not nervous about getting it wrong. Especially not because this is the first time *Mike* has leaned in. But when he replaces the touch of his thumb with his own lips, there's nothing wrong about it. Maybe there should be - Will is a boy, he's kissing a *boy* - but rather than put a damper on the moment, the thought sends a little thrill from Mike's stomach all the way to the tips of his fingers.

It feels like a victory. Like he should ball up his fists and scream into the sky, *Look! Look at us! We went through everything and we still have this! We don't give a shit about your rules - you can't touch us!*

He feels as though his whole being has been carbonated. Like he's filled with little bubbles, all fizzy and sparkling and spilling over. He doesn't realize that he's pressing more firmly into the kiss until Will moves his arms out of the way, allowing him closer. And Mike would love to move right into that space - to wrap his arms around Will's shoulders like a silent *I'm here, we're here, we made it, we're okay* - but he kind of needs to breathe. And he kind of can't. And it's kind of becoming an issue.

"It's different," he says again the second they break contact, even before he gasps in a breath. Because this part is important. It's not just that he's liked Will for longer, it's - "It's different. The way I like -" No. If he's going to say this, he's going to say it properly. She deserves that much. They both do. "The way I love El isn't the same as the way I love you."

Will has that smile again - that big, pure, simply *happy* smile - and he beams at Mike for about three seconds straight before he breaks into a giggle and he dives into Mike's shoulder, hiding his red face.

"This is not real life," Will finally mutters against the worn fabric of Mike's borrowed sweatshirt. "This kind of stuff isn't supposed to happen to - people like me. It just doesn't."

His breath hitches just slightly in the middle of his sentence, and it

hits Mike all at once just how much Will is trusting him. How hard - no, how terrifying it must have been to bare his soul the way he did. He all but handed Mike his biggest, most jealously guarded secret, with absolutely no guarantee that Mike wouldn't throw it back in his face with a curse. Liking a boy is something Mike has been puzzling over for just under a week, but Will? If Mike's suspicions are right, Will has been meticulously hiding this for years.

Riding a wave of sudden, unnamable emotion, Mike slips his arms around Will's shoulders and presses the smaller boy fiercely to him. It's something like a hug, if a hug was badly planned and messily executed - elbows jabbing into ribs and spines twisted at awkward angles to accommodate the gesture of affection. Despite all this, Mike tucks his chin into the sleek curve of Will's hair and tries *really* hard to telepathically communicate everything he can't figure out how to say.

"Will you tell her?" Will says, after enduring the kind-of-hug for a few seconds and then gently freeing himself.

Mike blinks, then realizes that he's talking about El. His lips press together. "I don't know. If she asks, I don't think I'd want to lie, but..."

Will lets him trail off, only picking up the train of thought for himself when Mike shrugs. "But it's like you said. Hawkins isn't always the best place for people like us." Mike's heart flutters just the tiniest bit at that. "Maybe it should be secret." A soft touch at Mike's hand draws his gaze, and Will wriggles his fingers between Mike's with a confidence that already surpasses that of Will-from-an-hour-ago. "Our secret."

There's something almost childishly enjoyable about having a secret. It's enough, just for a brief moment, to make Mike forget the reason that it needs to be a secret in the first place. That is, until Will's expression clouds again and he looks up at Mike with wide eyes. He leans forward, voice canting down even though the door is shut and Jonathan and Joyce are both rooms away attending to their own business.

"What are we gonna do? If anyone finds out..."

Mike's fingers squeeze around Will's, and he meets the intensity of Will's gaze without flinching. He keeps his voice as even and earnest as he can. "We'll be okay. We'll be careful. There's two of us now. We can help each other - pool resources. Watch each other's back. We could -" He licks his lips, eyes casting around the fort for a moment as if plucking ideas from the air around them. "We should come up with signals. So we can tell each other things when people are around. Morse - or Elvish. We could -"

He's already planning, brain whirring and churning out contingencies and courses of action like it always does. The implications of what he's saying don't fully register with him until Will talks over him.

"Do - are - do you want -" Mike shuts up and listens, and Will's recurring blush returns full-force. He squirms, sits straight up, and meets Mike's eyes. "Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

All that fizzy, bubbly energy returns in a rush to slosh around in Mike's chest, and he has to twist his head away to let a grin run its course. When he turns back, he means to cobble together a short speech of some sort. Something worthy of the moment. What comes out of his mouth instead is a soft, certain, "Yeah."

A/N: If you have a moment, my day is always absolutely made by reviews :)